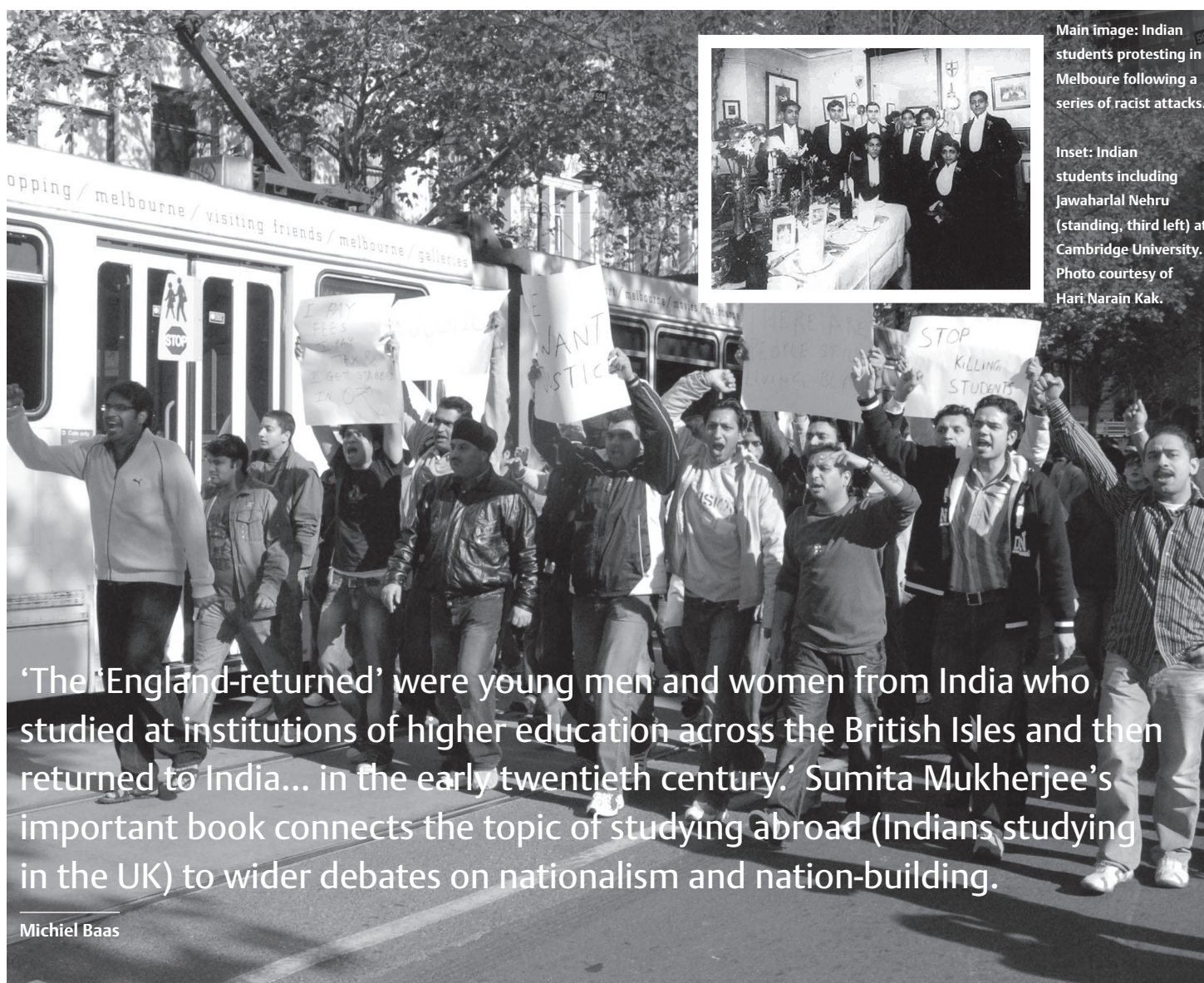


Indian students back home and abroad



Main image: Indian students protesting in Melbourne following a series of racist attacks.

Inset: Indian students including Jawaharlal Nehru (standing, third left) at Cambridge University. Photo courtesy of Hari Narain Kak.

‘The ‘England-returned’ were young men and women from India who studied at institutions of higher education across the British Isles and then returned to India.. in the early twentieth century.’ Sumita Mukherjee’s important book connects the topic of studying abroad (Indians studying in the UK) to wider debates on nationalism and nation-building.

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Mukherjee, Sumita. 2010.

Nationalism, Education and Migrant Identities: The England-returned.

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JAWAHARLAL NEHRU, India’s first prime minister, is the most famous person of all to have studied in the UK and then return to make a definite impact on India’s struggle for independence and the subsequent building of a new nation. However, the kind of elite life Nehru lived while studying at Cambridge University was certainly not replicated by most Indians who went to the UK at that time. There are many stories of upper-middle class upbringings, the odd alienation that living abroad brings with it, as well as other factors closely associated with studying abroad, such as the (disappointing) quality of education, making ends meet and trying to meet and get to know the locals. Yet what stands out in most of these stories, and in Mukherjee’s retelling of them, is how familiar they sound today.

Mukherjee’s book could not have been published at a more pertinent time. Studying abroad, and in particular Indian students studying abroad, has recently become headline news following a series of racist attacks in Australia. Mukherjee’s book comes at a time when studying abroad (by Asians, and in particular by Chinese and Indian students) has been discovered as a new and even newsworthy topic. This has a lot to do with the fact that studying abroad has increasingly become connected to the idea of migration. As I have shown myself in recent publications on the topic of Indian students in Australia: many are (also) migrants. As skilled migration programmes and the business of making money out of offering education to foreign students become ever more entangled, both at the level of the state and the individual, a complex new debate has arisen on the place of students and (temporary or permanent) skilled migrants in society.

Mukherjee’s book, interestingly, deals with the opposite. It takes the lives of students who studied in the UK but then returned to India as a central element of analysis. Historically, this was pretty much how things usually went. In general, students who came to a particular country for a number of years to study – either privately funded or on some kind of scholarship – often returned home with a particular purpose, such as helping the development of a freshly independent nation.

The ‘thing’ to do

From the 1870s onwards, small numbers of Indian students found their way to Oxford and Cambridge. This was partly the result of the British opening up their examinations for the Indian Civil Service. Besides preparing for these

examinations, in some prosperous Indian families, studying abroad had become the ‘thing’ to do. Initially, studying abroad was something only the upper-middle and upper class could afford. You needed a certain amount of influence and connections but, most of all, a considerable sum of money to be able to send your offspring overseas.

After World War Two, the idea of studying abroad, and who would be able to do so, changed considerably. Many countries in South and Southeast Asia became independent and confronted with the ‘threat’ of communism – certainly after the communists took over mainland China in 1949 – and the Cold War brought shivers to the West. Western countries approached this problem in various ways. One way of dealing with it was by concluding security pacts and forming military alliances with countries, for instance, in East Asia. Significantly, however, these countries had reached the conclusion that in order to contain the spread of communism they had to face up to the reasons why this had occurred in the first place. Western countries realised that the political stability of many former colonies was highly dependent on social and economic development. Besides the obvious humanitarian and economic reasons, it was also the political context that triggered western countries to provide aid in order to make sure economic and industrial development could take place in the developing countries. Consultants and advisors were sent, recommendations given and finances provided for the establishment of institutions for the training of scientists, engineers and administrators. In addition, some developed countries agreed to educate and train a certain number of students in their own institutions and at their own expense. Educational and scholarship opportunities were also opened up to unsponsored students from developing countries. It was, of course, made clear that these students had to return home after completing their studies so that they could assist in their countries development.

What was started in the fifties continued in the sixties. Overseas students were seen as important ‘interpreters and translators’ for the United States; they would one day go home and explain to their fellow countrymen what the US or the ‘West’ stood for and, hopefully, this would be a cheerful tale of progress and freedom.

Change in the air

From the mid 1960s onwards, the narrative on studying abroad shifts to the issue of non-return by overseas students and, connected to this, the issue of brain drain. Publications at this time clearly reflected this worry. At first, the overseas student was a guy who would help out his country and, in addition, promote the message of capitalism and freedom; now, he was slowly starting to be perceived as a person who failed in both fields: the risk that he might not return to his home country meant he

wouldn’t be able to help his country develop and progress and, at the same time, he would not be able to bring home positive tales of having befriended Americans and how much he had enjoyed living a capitalistic lifestyle among them. In fact, by the late 1960s, that second reason had already largely disappeared from the pages. Speculating about the reasons for this make little sense without elaborating on, for instance, how the Cold War was developing, where the Vietnam war was heading, how the Flower Power movement had gained momentum and how public opinion generally was changing on war and peace related matters. Yet change was in the air and the decades to come certainly showed a whole new approach to offering education to overseas students.

Current debates on foreign students can clearly be connected to the commodification of higher education which started in the 1980s. At the time, budget cuts in various countries led to a feverish period of education reform. Universities were encouraged to recruit foreign students who would pay full tuition fees and thus present themselves in the form of net income. Mukherjee’s study does not deal with this – as her study deals with the period of 1904-1947 – yet it can be placed in the wider historical context of studying abroad, which does not necessarily need to end where she stops. The book typically shows the kind of thinking that came with studying abroad, underlining all the more how much has changed since then. The sources that Mukherjee uses for her research have played a central role in the building of modern India. However, they were also a difficult category of people, often faced with feelings of alienation when they returned to India, sometimes even finding themselves ostracised from mainstream society, to which they no longer seemed or were considered to belong. They returned to India frequently inspired by political discussions on independence, Marxism and communism, yet also coming from ‘that world’ – where the coloniser was from – and having left behind dreams/memories/idealizations of an Anglo-Saxon world that had never materialised in reality when they were there. Yet back in India, they were clearly associated with that world. What were they now? At the beginning of her book Mukherjee asks: ‘why Britain, who was making this voyage? How did their lives change? Did their opinions, outlooks or ideologies change?’ Obviously they did. Yet paradoxically whereas the whole idea of studying in the UK had been designed to create a particular ‘interpreting’, ‘translating’ middle class, which would communicate and execute the colonisers’ desires, instead they became all the more aware of India’s potential, because of exposure to new ideas, as well as because of disappointment in who the coloniser-at-home really was.

The desirable ‘other’

The way studying abroad is sold in India now – whether it concerns studying in Australia, Canada or the US – is all about using images and slogans which communicate the desirable ‘other’; a place where one needs to be. In Australia, in recent years, this was also about creating a migration-desire; in countries such as the US and the UK this was less so. Yet whereas in colonial days the Isles reached out to its jewel in the crown in terms of offering education to what was understood as the future middle class – one that would guarantee the continuation of the colonial empire – current day international education is much more about money, making sure that the countries in question can support their own educational structures. A cynic would wonder: what’s new? The money that the West requires still needs to be generated in the East. Yet, I would argue, with one notable difference: increasingly students from India know exactly what kind of transnational journey they are about to embark on.

Australia has recently introduced a policy change making it almost impossible for foreign students to obtain permanent residency rights after graduation. This possibility had previously created a boom in overseas students’ enrollments from the year 2000 onwards. Other countries, such as Canada, who are keen to step into Australia’s shoes, as leading recruiter of international students, have already announced policy changes making it easier to stay onwards after graduation. At the same time, the UK has issued new regulations again making it harder. The place where education and migration meet remains a puzzling business and situation. Yet the most important thing we can learn from Mukherjee’s study in perspective to current developments in the world of education and migration is that the state’s intentions in terms studying abroad or the recruitment of overseas students does not always result in the desired outcome. What the international media is reporting on the Australian case in terms of newness – in the sense of there never having been a situation before where overseas students do not turn out to be the solution for a country’s national problems (skills gap) – can thus be understood as a regularly repeating phenomenon. If only we would remember our history lessons.

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